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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Arkansas's Black River Technical College (BRTC) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which worked to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. The proposed centerpiece of BRTC's program is called the "The Century Wall," a large mural which is to depict the faces of 100 Americans who, with their diverse racial, religious, and ethnic identities, have made a difference in shaping the 20th century. The project includes a student researched and written booklet which contains a keyed schema and short biographies of the 100 individuals. Community interest, including generous coverage in a regional newspaper, has been remarkably keen. Letter surveys were sent to colleagues at Arkansas State University, as well as to local organizations and schools in order to get suggestions for people to include in the mural. In the summer, prospective muralists were contacted and infusion activities for the fall were planned. In the fall, English teachers required readings of multicultural novels. Food Science students were assigned four multicultural short stories which focused on food. Government students had a focused study on the role of the media in shaping out perceptions of ethnic groups in America. Other students were involved in gathering continued community input. The project faced some delays as a result of the high levels of community interest. (HAA)

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Exploring America's Communities
Progress Report

Black River Vocational-Technical School

In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

JC 970 091

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Introduction

Now in its sixth year as an institution of higher education, Black River Technical College was founded twenty-five years ago as a vocational-technical school serving the almost totally homogenous white population of rural northeast Arkansas. Since the transition to a two-year college, BRTC has doubled its size, with its 1,200 students now split evenly between those in the college transfer and those in the technical divisions. The community's historical farm base dwindled while its industrial segment grew in the past two decades, but the predominantly low-tech job market has suffered tremendously from foreign competition in the past year. The severest blow came last year with the closure of the community's oldest and largest employer, Brown Shoe company, which at the time employed over ten percent of the community's total work force. The result: Randolph County's jobless rate is today the highest in the state. BRTC has stepped forward to provide re-training and other educational opportunities for a significant number of these and other displaced workers of all ages, many of whom have lived and worked their entire lives in this community. Their arrival at BRTC coincided with the college's entry into the "Exploring America's Communities" project, and their presence here simultaneously affirms the need and enhances the possibilities of this humanities project at BRTC.

Primary Goals

Our proposal's centerpiece is "The Century Wall," a large mural which is to depict the faces of 100 Americans who, in all their pluralities of color, religion, and ethnic identities, have made a difference in shaping the 20th Century. The project includes a student researched/student written booklet which contains a keyed schemata and short biographies of the 100. Thus the

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wall will serve as a unique sort of silent but eloquent educator for all of us: for those who live and work here, for those who pass through, and for students of all ages from the region. By involving our staff, students and the entire community in developing and selecting those to be depicted on the mural, we hoped to increase awareness, understanding, and appreciation of America's incredibly rich and beautiful diversity. The need for such understanding is especially great here at BRTC, where so many of us have lived in near-total isolation from other cultures, and where many at this time in their lives feel deep economics-driven resentment and distrust of large segments of America's peoples. We hoped also that the project would serve as a catalyst for multicultural curricular enhancement opportunity.

Accomplishments

From the beginning press announcing BRTC's proposal, community interest has been remarkably keen. Following generous coverage in a regional newspaper, a widely-read columnist featured the proposal, and even devised his own rather significant "list" of people for the wall. Thus began the input and conversation from people-- wherever we team members went--about who might be depicted on the wall. One of our earlier formal activities included letter surveys to our colleagues at Arkansas State University, as well as to local organizations and schools. We promised that any eligible name submitted would be considered, and that any group responding would be acknowledged in the booklet, and by the end of the spring semester, the list of nominees was quite interesting, and growing daily.

Summer activity on the project included contacting prospective muralists and learning about the art of mural painting, as well as working on our own reading lists and planning infusion activities for the fall semester.

By the beginning of the fall faculty workshops, the English faculty had decided to include in

the syllabus for all Freshman I and II composition students the required reading of a multiculturally appropriate novel which would yield opportunity for dialogue and essay writing. Novels which represent Asian American, Mexican American, Native American, and African American literature were selected and coordinated. Response on this activity has been overwhelmingly positive, both from the students and from faculty. Portfolios of student writings, as well as consensus from the faculty, have led to the commitment to repeat the activity in the spring 1997 semester. At its conclusion, final assessment activities will determine whether to make the curricular change a permanent one, and what, if any, modifications to make. It appears very likely the faculty will adopt the infusion as a curricular change.

A second highly successful and positive infusion activity included a joint project with the Dietary Management department. The English faculty selected and distributed to Food Science student four multicultural short stories, each of which focused in some way on the topic of food. The Food Science class then met jointly in four separate class periods with the respective English or Fiction classes for discussion and activity relative to the four stories. Here, too, student writings in response to the activity indicate the project was a valuable one, which benefited not only the dietary students, but Gen Ed students as well. A further outgrowth of the activity is a request from the Dietary instructor for further collaboration in assisting her students to develop culturally specific nutrition brochures for use in her Community Nutrition class.

Government students were busy with a focused study on the role of the media in shaping our perceptions of ethnic groups in America. The activity will be repeated in the spring semester, and as with the English infusion activity, evaluated and assessed for possible inclusion into the curriculum on a permanent basis.

Other students, meanwhile, were involved in gathering continued community input into "The

Century Wall." Approximately 30 members (or future members) of Phi Theta Kappa manned booths at four separate community events: Randolph County Fair, Maynard Pioneer Days, Old Davidsonville State Park Rendezvous, and Indian Summer Arts and Crafts Festival. Visitors numbering in the thousands actually submitted up to five nominations for the wall. Students later sorted through the forms, eliminating duplications, and added the nominees to an ever growing "master list" of names. Similar activities were conducted at local civic club meetings.

Remaining activity

Interestingly, the phenomenon of such high level of community interest has proven a mixed blessing. The mayor, along with members of the Chamber of Commerce and others, expressed interest in locating the mural in a planned River Front Park currently under development instead of on the downtown building sites being considered. This consideration, along with such obstacles as the necessity of actually constructing a wall, financing the construction, gaining approval of the Park Committee, avoiding the flood plain, and ensuring architectural integration with the Park's design, etc., have resulted in numerous delays in the decision on the location of the mural. Our original timeline indicated the mural painting would commence in the spring of 1997; this time frame is still possible, but may face further delay.

Although the humanities team had planned a joint project with the Developmental Reading instructor, whereby those students would read multiculturally appropriate children's stories in local schools and day care centers, the project was not completed. A framework for this activity has been developed, and an English faculty member has agreed to coordinate it in the spring semester. Here the obstacle in completion was simply trying to do too much--planning beyond what our time and commitments would allow us to accomplish.

Completion of the booklets for "The Century Wall" is planned for the spring semester,

when a class of Freshman English II students will pair up with a Desktop Publishing class to collaborate on the researching, writing and production of the booklets. The students will work in pairs, one business student, one English student, with each pair responsible for four biographies. Additionally, the student teams will become a part of a BRTC "Speaker's Bureau," and will be asked to find at least one "public" forum where they will jointly present their experience. The focus will be to strengthen the students' critical thinking abilities by asking them to consider "What do these individuals have in common, both with each other and with me?"

Response

"My students were clearly affected," said one instructor who taught The Joy Luck Club. "They read the novel and then saw the movie. They cried. They discussed the story, they related their own feelings about their mothers, and they kept stressing they never knew how much we have in common with people of different cultures." Another student, whose readings included A Lesson Before Dying and Their Eyes Were Watching God, wrote, "With the combination of the stories and class discussion, the distance we've come as a human race and how far we have to go has become very evident." Especially remarkable was this statement from a student, who, after reading The Education of Little Tree, admitted this was the first book he had ever read in its entirety, and wrote: "I don't read much, maybe because I don't have the time or willpower to start. I waited until the last minute to start on this book. Although I didn't want to begin, after I started reading I couldn't put the book down. This book contains many morals and small lessons. I enjoyed it the most because I learned a lot about Indians and their culture. I had heard and learned about Indians and how they were treated, but never realized the reality of it until this book."